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Daniel J. Mahoney
Assumption College, dmahoney@assumption.edu

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Daniel J. Mahoney

Stranger Than Fiction

*The Strange Death of Marxism:
The European Left in the New Millennium*

by Paul Edward Gottfried. University of Missouri Press, 2005.

American conservatives are more disengaged from European political and intellectual life than ever, and many are intent to condemn all things European. Of course, a certain distrust of “advanced” European thought is perfectly warranted: the dominant stream of European opinion has indeed turned away from the best intellectual and moral resources of the Western tradition. Europeans increasingly identify democracy with apolitical humanitarianism and an indiscriminate openness to the “Other,” and they exhibit a deep skepticism about the classical and Christian well-springs of their own—and our—civilization. Nonetheless, opposed to this consensus are noble and notable exceptions. The most thoughtful European critics of these trends (many of whom happen to be French) speak suggestively about the “depoliticization” and “demoralization” of the European nations.

Americans need to know more about the dominant European discourse—and about those who dissent from it. We need to do so in part to avoid an ominous spiritual temptation, that of resting content with spiritual autarchy or self-sufficiency. Too many American conservative intellectuals are now convinced that the United States in

principle embodies *all* the wisdom available to thinking and acting man. American conservatives thus find themselves in something of a conundrum. On the one hand, they take legitimate pride in being caretakers of the Western tradition, of the best that has been thought and said; on the other hand, they show little interest in sustaining the intellectual and spiritual ties that still bind Europe and America. As a result, they are less prepared to confront pernicious European ideas—and less able to benefit from those European thinkers, not a few in number, who continue to enrich the common patrimony of the West. This drift toward spiritual autarchy is good neither for what remains of the West nor for the moral and intellectual integrity of American conservatism.

Paul Gottfried’s lively and erudite book is an effort to make sense of the complicated relations between European and American intellectual life today. To his credit, he never lets animus toward contemporary European self-loathing lead to ignorance of

Daniel J. Mahoney is Professor of Political Science at Assumption College and the coeditor (with Edward E. Ericson, Jr.) of *The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings, 1947–2005* (ISI Books).

things European. He displays an impressive command of postwar European history and of every major current of contemporary European thought; he is particularly strong on German and Italian intellectual currents, and generally competent with French ones, too. His book challenges a widespread tendency to set up excessively binary distinctions between European and American intellectual and political life and thus to ignore the myriad ways in which currents on either side of the Atlantic influence and mutually reinforce one another.

Gottfried's theme is the "Americanization" of the European Left and the insidious mix of multiculturalism and "anti-fascism" that marks the European "Post-Marxist" civil religion. In a fine phrase, he suggests that orthodox Marxism was done in by "an increasingly uncooperative reality," as well as by the sordid reality of "really-existing socialism." With globalization and the "bourgeoisification" of Western societies, the economic and social base for mass Communist parties of the kind that flourished in Italy and France between the 1940s and the late 1970s no longer exists. What is left of the working classes often votes for parties of the far Right who are suspicious of mass immigration and who challenge the multiculturalist consensus of European elites.

Marxist-Leninism is utterly unpersuasive in its orthodox or pristine form. The new Post-Marxist Left is "Marxist" only in its continuing disdain for liberal and Christian civilization and its broad (if ill-defined) support for a revolutionary or "transformational" politics. What goes by the name of the Left in Europe today is for all intents and purposes a Post-Marxist Left, one that has abandoned classical Marxism's emphasis on economic determinism and class-based politics. Instead, the Left has turned to lifestyle radicalism, to multiculturalism, and to indulgence for Third World extremism in order to reinvigorate

the transformational impulse. In doing so, it has adopted much from the intellectual program of the soft American Left.

Gottfried rightly notes that "although politically less violent than other Lefts," the Post-Marxist Left is "culturally and socially more radical." One cannot picture members of the Politburos of old demanding homosexual marriage or defending the rights of the "transgendered." But that is exactly the kind of politics promoted by the Social Democratic mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit, an out-of-the-closet homosexual who successfully combines sexual politics with revolutionary symbolism (he is, for example, committed to building a statue to honor the revolutionary theorist and activist Rosa Luxemburg).

In his insightful final chapter, Gottfried discusses the Post-Marxist Left as an "incomplete" form of "political religion." It is incomplete because it lacks the virility of the old totalitarian political religions and because its indiscriminate openness to the "Other" (including Muslim radicalism) makes it difficult for it to perpetuate its own "political correctness" as the foundation of a stable social order. Gottfried draws an instructive parallel between this new, "humanitarian" civil religion and the "soft despotism" sketched by Tocqueville at the end of the second volume of *Democracy in America*. The Post-Marxist Left aims in principle at "political management that eventually approaches total control but with less and less need for physical force." Gottfried helpfully explores the intellectual foundations of this recipe for a despotism that masks itself as an agent of democratic transformation.

In some of his more provocative pages, Gottfried traces how the American occupation authorities in postwar Germany promoted a "reeducation" in democratic values that ended up being directed as much against traditional moral and patriotic sen-

timents as against genuine indulgence toward totalitarianism. More generally, the postwar liberal preoccupation with “the authoritarian personality” paved the way for the New Left’s “therapeutic war” against every form of real or imagined bigotry. The generation that came of age with the revolutionary events of 1968 saw themselves as promoting true democracy, a democratic order that is necessarily postnational, post-religious, and suspicious of every authoritative intellectual and moral claim. The distinguished philosopher Jürgen Habermas is the most moderate and influential face of this fundamentally illiberal current of thought. Although no totalitarian himself, this theoretician of “communicative rationality” was a sometime apologist for the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) before 1990. Habermas and his supporters have continued forcefully to denounce every effort to

morally equate National Socialist and Communist despotism, calling such judgments a form of “revisionism.” Critics of his postnational “constitutional patriotism,” whatever their anti-totalitarian pedigree, are suspected of a lingering indulgence toward fascism. “Anti-fascism” is the weapon used by the new political religion to delegitimize all resistance to “human rights” and democracy as redefined by the new dispensation.

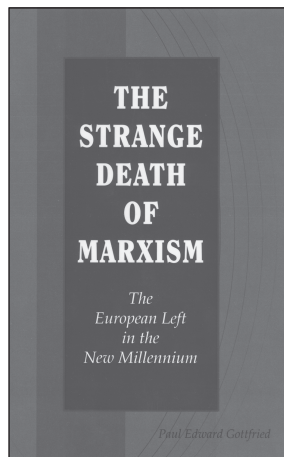
In contrast, the founding fathers of the German Federal Republic, such as Konrad Adenauer, were principled anti-totalitarians who defended “a constitutional tradition that reflected Christian moral teachings and maintained spheres of individual and corporate authority that set limits on the central state.” This “liberal-conserva-

tive consensus” was the postwar public philosophy that was systematically challenged—and held up to ridicule and scorn—by the generation of 1968. The rhetoric of “human rights” as claims against a traditional bourgeois and Christian order is now the common property of intellectual elites on both sides of the Atlantic. And Gottfried shows that as the New Left entered mainstream politics and intellectual discourse, it became friendly to a kind of multiculturalism and sexual politics that had an unmistakably American provenance.

One of the particular strengths of Gottfried’s book is the way it traces the deep-seated indulgence of the Post-Marxist Left toward the crimes of communism. The “lingering Communist deity” continues to bewitch a major part of the Left and is a source of moral corruption in contemporary European life. “Anti-fascist” politics demands

that evil be located uniquely on the Right, with the differences between authentically democratic conservative currents and a loosely defined “fascism” effaced. European Social Democrats of the 1950s were on the whole tough-minded anticommunists. But while their post-Marxist successors have abandoned Marxist political economy, they continue to adamantly oppose any identification of the crimes of the two major totalitarianisms of the twentieth century as manifestations of ideological twins.

The German case is somewhat more complicated, since historians such as Ernst Nolte *have* tended to use the crimes of communism to “relativize” the murderous deeds of National Socialism, although without denying or justifying the evils of the latter. But the ferocious reaction of the French Left to



Where have the Reds gone?

the publication of *The Black Book of Communism* in 1997 ought to give us pause. That book had painstakingly documented the crimes of communism, and its editor Stéphane Courtois had not hesitated to draw parallels between communism and the other manifestation of Absolute Evil in the twentieth century. Yet speaking to the National Assembly, then Prime Minister Lionel Jospin vehemently defended the honor of communism, repudiating any effort to equate it with National Socialism. The continuing power of the “anti-fascist” narrative reminds us just how much the European Left has invested in the illusions of progressivism. “Anti-fascism” demands nothing less than amnesia about the evils and crimes committed in the name of an ideology of Progress.

It should be acknowledged, however, that powerful critics of Communist totalitarianism such as Russian Nobel laureate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and independent-minded historians such as François Furet and Alain Besançon have helped to dramatically transform the way the French think about communism. Gottfried thus goes too far when he seems to suggest that the Post-Marxist Left has in fact succeeded in imposing its intellectual despotism over a cowed and subservient public. When the French academic Daniel Lindenberg published a particularly reckless pamphlet (*La Rappel à l'ordre*, 2002) on the “new reactionaries” who allegedly opposed democracy because they challenged the ideology of '68, the accused (who included scholars and commentators of great stature, insight, and good sense such as Marcel Gauchet, Alain Besançon, Pierre Manent, and Alain Finkielkraut) fought back with real success. Gottfried weakens a strong case by overstating it.

If Gottfried's principal polemical target is the “political religion” of the Post-Marxist Left, his secondary one is what he

calls “the foreign contamination” school. He particularly has in mind Allan Bloom. In his wide-ranging 1987 bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom spoke about the ways in which vulgarized versions of the thought of Heidegger and Nietzsche had corrupted American discourse about morality and politics. Americans had come to adopt the lexicon of “values” and “culture” at the expense of a more traditional and commonsensical idiom of rights and responsibilities. Gottfried mocks Bloom's claims and reports them in a less than equitable manner. But Gottfried cannot reasonably deny that “in certain respects Marx and Nietzsche are ‘opposite extremes’: but by many paths their descendants come together,” as Raymond Aron had already very nicely put it in 1956. In his book, Bloom spoke about “The Nietzscheanization of the Left or Vice Versa.” Despite his anti-Bloom polemics, Gottfried provides much evidence to support—and reinforce—that description.

By insisting that economic determinism and historical materialism exhaust the meaning of contemporary Marxism, Gottfried ends up downplaying the “Marxist” component of the New Left. But even he finally concedes that the Post-Marxist Left is not simply “Post-Marxist” after all: it is indulgent toward communism precisely because it partakes of its anti-bourgeois and anti-Christian ire and wants to pursue its “universalist, egalitarian vision” in a different way and in substantially new circumstances. All of this is to suggest that the Nietzschean *and* Marxist components of the Post-Marxist Left have more substance than Gottfried is willing to admit. A truly capacious and dialectical explanation of the sources of the new European political religion should neither understate nor overstate its distinctively American component.

For all his learning and insight, Gottfried is also rather too insistent that America is

already an “administered” state where authentic self-government has largely ceased to exist. Is it not precisely the existence of real democratic accountability in the United States that prevents the emergence of anything resembling the European Post-Marxist Left as a politically efficacious force in our society? This is in no way to deny the ubiquitous power and influence of the “diversity regime” in the universities, churches, business world, and even the polity.

Paul Gottfried has written a courageous book, one that exposes the pretensions of humanitarian democracy, the emerging political religion of elites on both sides of the Atlantic. He is undoubtedly correct that the new regime of political correctness both distorts the past and blocks legitimate democratic discussion. By preventing political self-correction where necessary, it guarantees that legitimate concerns will be appropriated by “the morally compromised”—by extremist parties and intellectual movements that distort the effective addressing of legitimate civic concerns about

immigration and the political integrity of national communities.

Gottfried powerfully chronicles the “misadventures” of the European Post-Marxist Left and helpfully points out the American provenance of some of its ideas and methods. But he doesn’t do nearly enough to distinguish authentic Americanism, rooted in respect for democratic self-government, from a multiculturalist ideology that derives much of its intellectual firepower from the European cultural Left in the first place. We need a genuinely “dialectical” account of these influences that avoids the simplifications and defensiveness of those who blame everything on “foreign contamination” and that still recognizes the largely European *intellectual* foundations of multiculturalism and postmodernism. If Gottfried has not provided that dialectical account, he has written an authoritative one of the postmodern Left that should help American conservatives reacquaint themselves with the intellectual geography of contemporary Europe.